

Baer, Brian James (Ed.) (2011). *Contexts, Subtexts and Pretexts. Literary translation in Eastern Europe and Russia*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins. 332 pp.

This volume on *Literary translation in Eastern Europe and Russia* in the prestigious *Benjamins Translation Library* series is entirely dedicated to the *Other Europe*, as Eastern Europe is frequently regarded to by scholars from Western Europe. I would have written *Central and Eastern Europe* as I usually do when mentioning the region, but the editor has good reason not to use the concept of *Central Europe*, as he explains in the *Introduction* (p. 2-3), following the recommendations in the paper by Charles Sabatos (see further down).

For some years now the classical viewpoint of Western translation studies scholars has shifted towards more *exotic* regions and cultures. As editor Baer correctly points out (p. 1), non-Western translation traditions are becoming “increasingly visible in recent years as a reaction to hegemonic Western models of translation and the general eurocentrism of contemporary translation studies”. However, renouncing eurocentrism in translation studies usually involves a turn towards Asian and African translation topics. Despite the impressive papers by, for instance, Russian, Czech and Slovak scholars (p. 5) in the theory of translation studies, the eastern part of Europe is largely neglected in most recent Western publications on the subject, which led to the big gap that this volume partly tries to fill.

The collection of translation studies-related articles *Contexts, Subtexts and Pretexts* is an attempt to cover most of the region of Eastern Europe. The majority of languages and cultures in the region (not only the Slavic languages that the area is too often associated with) are represented in the volume and only the Russian subjects (8 papers) obviously outnumber the other themes which might, however, reflect fairly realistically the respective weight of these languages and cultures in contemporary translation studies. Besides Russian only one Slavic culture is dealt with twice in the volume, for one of the great representatives of Czech literature is present as the metaphorical *alpha and omega* of the volume: Milan Kundera, an author with a more than moderate interest in translation, has the honor to open and close the volume. Other languages treated in the volume are Ukrainian, Romanian, Croatian, Serbian, Slovenian, Hungarian, Bulgarian, Polish and Latvian.

The volume not only geographically covers most part of the Eastern European region, it also addresses a broad range of different translation-related topics, with papers on various aspects of translation. Most of the papers, however, look at translation from a cultural studies angle, emphasizing the role politics and ideology have played and still play in the development of culture in Eastern Europe and Russia, especially during the 20th century. Most of the papers deal with what André Lefevere (1992: 15) calls “patronage outside the literary system”, i.e. political and ideological pressure. Geographical borders, linguistic colonialism and the consolidation of cultural identity are key concepts in nearly all articles in this volume.

As the title of the volume suggests, the papers are divided into three sections, the first of which, *Contexts*, deals with “the broad cultural and political contexts that helped shape the choice of texts for translation, the translation approach taken, and the reception of translated texts in the various cultures represented by Eastern Europe and Russia” (p. 10). This is the

largest part of the volume with 7 papers on 5 different Eastern European languages. In the opening paper, a key question in Slavic studies is touched upon, i.e. the existence, or rather the alleged non-existence, of a conceptual *Central Europe*. **Charles Sabatos** relates the history of Kundera's essay on the "Tragedy of Central Europe" (1984) in which the author claimed the existence of a transnational Central European identity, based on "*small nations* rather than languages, including Austria but not Germany, and even <...> Slovenia and Croatia" (p. 25). Sabatos, however, explains why he is not convinced by Kundera's ideas.

Nation building and the development of national culture is the common theme in the next two papers as well. **Vitaly Chernetsky** addresses the problem of "shaping <...> modern Ukrainian culture" (p. 33) and investigates this process as a reaction to what he calls Ukraine's *colonial* history. In Chernetsky's view, literary translation should be considered as a "conscious project of resistance" (p. 34) against the domination of Russian language and culture. Literary translations from languages other than Russian, frequently funded by Western institutions, mark, according to the author, a double process of globalization and strengthening of national identity in Ukraine. **David L. Cooper**, on the other hand, shows how the Russian nation had similar doubts about its own identity, albeit in another period, namely the beginning of the 19th century when Russia was in search of *narodnost'* (national originality) and its own voice in world literature. Cooper illustrates the polemics about translations and the concept of originality in Russia through the work of author-translator Vasilij Žukovskij and a reaction from colleague writer Nikolai Gogol.

Translation and the nation's cultural identity play an equally important role in **Sean Cotter**'s paper on the thinking of the Romanian philosopher, essayist and poet Constantin Noica. Cotter deals with Noica's "international nationalism" and his ideas about Romania as "Europe's translator" (p. 80). Noica is convinced that translation activities benefit only "the translator, not the public that reads them" (p. 86) and therefore Romania should play its role of "Europe's translator", wedged as it is between three large empires (Austro-Hungary, Russia and the Ottoman empire).

Susmita Sundaram brings the reader back to Russia with an article on Konstantin Bal'mont's translating activities. Bal'mont was one of the free spirits among the poets of Russia's *Silver Age*, who showed great interest in ancient and exotic cultures (the Mayas, India, Egypt) and considered himself as a *cultural mediator* between Russia and various distant cultures. At a higher level the writer saw Russia as a mediator between East and West (p. 113), providing the nation with a specific mission in the world. Sundaram extensively illustrates Bal'mont's Indophilia (p. 107) and his love of oriental motifs.

Sibelan Forrester investigates, in her paper, how Croatian and Serbian authors used translations of Russian avant-garde writers from the early 20th century "in order to shape his or her own bibliography and literary personality" (p. 117). Forrester pays tribute to writer-translators Sever, Kiš, Vrkljan and Ugrešić who continued to recommend Russian literature to their Croatian and Serbian audience in a period (the 1970s and 1980s) when Russian (Soviet?) literature "appeared as stunted as the economy" (p. 119) and the number of literary translations from Russian rapidly dropped in favor of translations from English.

The last paper of the *Contexts* part deals with a more practical translation topic – the problem of translating "theoretical categories and social types for which there are no Slovenian counterparts" (p. 137), especially lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered

literature and non-fiction. The author, **Suzana Tratnik**, is a translator of “seminal Western works of gay and lesbian fiction and queer theory” (ibid.) herself who recounts her own struggle to find translations for this special type of *realia*, as much of the required terminology is not yet developed in Slovenian.

The second part, *Subtexts*, has 5 papers in 3 different languages, dealing with “the various ways in which politics has mediated the theory and practice of translation in Eastern Europe and Russia” (p. 11). This part is dominated by *Russian* papers that afford insight into the position of translation against the background of politics, ideology and censorship in the former Soviet Union. **Susanna Witt**, for instance, investigates the probably largest ever “coherent project of translation” (p. 149) – the history of literary translation in the Soviet Union, that, according to Witt, remains “still basically unwritten” (p. 167). She is convinced that a closer look at the Soviet translation project could even supply “new perspectives on such key concepts, such as source language, target language, authenticity and translation agency” (p. 168).

The next two papers examine the ideas and translating practices of three well-known names in Russian history of literary translation. **Brian James Baer** relates how two coryphaei of Russian literary translation, Roman Jakobson and Vladimir Nabokov, became theoretical opponents in the Cold War period. The polarization between these great thinkers became obvious in the context of a proposed joint translation project of the famous *Slovo o polku Igoreve* (The Lay of Igor’s Campaign) that Nabokov saw foremost as a pure work of art, while Jakobson apparently wanted to use the Russian origin of the anonymous text for patriotic political and ideological concerns. **Yasha Klots**, in his paper, illustrates how ideological censorship can also contribute to a poet’s artistic completion. In the case of Nobel Laureate Iosif Brodskij, for instance, “the process of reconciling <...> aesthetic predispositions to the ideological demands of the state-owned publishing industry” (p. 187) forced the poet to refine his own poetics. Translations from a broad range of languages gave Brodskij the opportunity to create a kind of *pure poetry*, independent of the source language in which the poetry has been written, and strengthened his idea about the poet being the instrument of an ultimate *Ur-language*, instead of vice versa (p. 200-201).

The effects of (communist) censorship on the practices of literary translation are the leitmotif running through the next two papers as well. **László Scholz** explains the reasons behind “the surprising uniformity of translations” of Latin American narrative texts into Hungarian in the postwar period (p. 205). Scholz blames the practices of planned art for being “by nature old-fashioned” (p. 216) and therefore averse to the stylistic experiments of modernity. As **Vitana Kostadinova** points out, in her paper on literary translations (or rather the absence of translations!) of Byron in Bulgaria, literary and historical contexts can have a great influence on translation practices. In describing the reasons for not translating Byron in three different periods of Bulgarian cultural history she clearly illustrates why “the absence of translations in a given culture can speak as loudly as the translations themselves” (p. 219).

Somehow more heterogeneous is the third part of the volume, *Pretexs*, on “the secondary status traditionally attributed to translated texts” (p. 11) with a special focus on contemporary translation. This section presents the reader with another 6 papers dealing with 4 different Eastern European cultures. The first two articles touch upon contemporary translation practices in Russia. **Vlad Strukov** focuses on the cultural authority of film

translator *Goblin* and deals with questions of intellectual property in a globalized world. Strukov relates how *Goblin* gradually introduced new forms of film translation by first thoroughly domesticating discourse in his earlier works and transforming translation into parody later on in his work. **Aleksei Semenenko** discusses a more traditional, even canonical, topic – the translation of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* into Russian. Semenenko investigates and compares no fewer than six twenty-first-century translations of *Hamlet* and concludes that all the translations, however different they might be, share some common, typically postmodern features (p. 261). All six translators tend to modernize the text and even “strive not to translate the text, but to give an original interpretation of individual passages” in order to write their “names in the history of *Hamlet*” (p. 261-262).

The expectations of the postmodern reader are dealt with in the paper of **Natalia Olshanskaya** on translations of Russian dystopias into English. By its nature the dystopian narratives of Evgenij Zamjatin and Vladimir Vojnovič contain a more than average amount of *untranslatable* vocabulary, used to depict the dystopian worlds created by the authors. Olshanskaya investigates translators’ decisions and decides that contemporary literary translators tend to “over-domesticate” the target texts “in part because of the inability of the general readership to relate to the dual nature of specifically Russian cultural references and the hidden implications of the Russian absurd” (p. 273). **Allen J. Kuharski** addresses another topic of *translatability* in his paper on “translating classical tragedy into Polish theater” (p. 277). Kuharski focuses on stage director Zadara’s recent attempts to revive “neglected Polish and foreign classics” (ibid.) by adapting the dramas of Racine and Kochanowski and performing them on the twenty-first-century stage in Poland. He illustrates Polish concerns about the will, on the one hand, to integrate culturally into a larger European tradition and the fear, on the other hand, of losing its own cultural identity.

An even stronger concern about cultural and linguistic identity is seen in Latvia where first German and later Russian were the dominant languages and where nowadays “70% percent (sic) of the texts consumed by the average Latvian are translations”, mainly from English (p. 295). **Gunta Ločmele** and **Andrejs Veisbergs** observe in their paper a rapid “shift in norms and conventions” (ibid.) in Latvian, directly affected by English norms, not only on the level of lexis and semantics, but also in grammatical constructions, spelling norms and even the phonetic system (p. 307), thus illustrating globalizing tendencies as a result of translation practices.

Milan Kundera not only opens this volume on literary translation in Eastern Europe and Russia, he is also the theme of the closing paper, written by **Jan Rubeš**, on the author’s “problematic relationship” with “the translation of his work” (p. 317). Hardly any writer shows more interest in literary translation than Kundera, who sees translation as his “entrée onto the world stage” (ibid.) but who is, at the same time, rather reluctant to the loss of control the translation process contains. In the case of Kundera, Rubeš points out, the situation is even more complex because his early (Czech) novels have been translated into French, while the author himself is writing in French at the moment and “refuses to authorize the Czech translation of his books written in French” (p. 322). The whole complexity of authorship and the status of translated texts could not be illustrated more strikingly than in this closing paper to volume 89 in *Benjamins Translation Library*.

Contexts, Subtexts and Pretexts is a real must-have for all translation researchers working on that ‘Other Europe’, but for whom a lot of sources written in ‘minority languages’ remain unreadable, as well as for researchers in Slavic studies dealing with translation. So it seems all the more annoying to me that such an inspiring collection of papers has been rather carelessly compiled, for a lot of typographical and formal errors have made it into the final version of the text. Apparently, not all proper names in the articles have been checked, as I find Norvid instead of Norwid (p. 198-199), Brian De Palmo instead of Brian De Palma (p. 238) and the Norwegian instead of the country name Norway (p. 320). Moreover, the editor apparently made no use of a style sheet neither for bibliographical references, nor for the transcription or transliteration of the Cyrillic alphabet. The different contributors to this volume all use their own system which resulted in various inconsistencies in the bibliography. Marina Cvetaeva (I prefer the ISO R/9 system myself), for instance, is twice referred to in the bibliography, once as Cvetaeva (p. 324) and once as Tsvetaeva (p. 331) without any cross-references between the two. The same goes for Majakovskij and Mayakovsky (p. 328), while Černov is cited next to Chernyshchevsky (sic – this name does not contain a “shch”) on p. 324. Even more confusing is the reference to a certain Meirkhol’hold (sic) on the same page, an obviously wrong transcription for Mejerhol’d (ISO R/9) or at least Meyerhold (in English transcription), to whom a reference is made in one of the papers (p. 165), without this name being added to the bibliography.

Despite these formal inconsistencies *Contexts, Subtexts and Pretexts* touches upon some very essential and *hot* topics in literary translation in Eastern Europe and Russia and should be recommended to a broad public of translation scholars and students.

Reference

Lefevere, André (1992). *Translation, Rewriting and the Manipulation of Literary Fame*. London/New York: Routledge.

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